

Your computer needs cleaning every now and then



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When sitting at your computer and starting up Internet Explorer (IE) you can tell right away if things are working ok or not. Right when IE starts up and begins to load your home page whether that is the Microsoft default of www.MSN.com, or your Webmail site like Yahoo.com, you can usually feel if the load time takes longer.

If everything is working good from the computer itself performing properly, to the Internet Service Provider (ISP) delivering good bandwidth, to the Website running smoothly, the Webpage content should pop right up on your screen in the usual time. But, if any of those three entities are having problems you may see a slight delay or even a long pause before your home page appears.

Problems with the ISP are pretty much out of your control other than waiting until a lower bandwidth consumption time frame that is not in prime time. Other than changing your ISP plan by purchasing more bandwidth or even changing your provider, you are basically at their mercy.

We have had Texas Broadband wireless Internet service for over six years now and it was a major improvement over our satellite ISP which was both

slow and unreliable. From time to time however, there are periods we get reduced performance due to high network traffic, equipment problems, or even lightning storms.

Trouble at the far end with Websites down is usually rare since most of the major Internet sites have redundant servers and mas-

sive bandwidth pipes delivering their Web content to surfers. Once in a while you will hit a single server based Web site or even a virtual server site that is overloaded which can really slow down your IE performance.

So if Web pages are loading slowly and since the odds are against it being the ISP or Web site, your PC is probably the problem. First and foremost, when was the last time you rebooted it? I must ask that question numerous times a day. Multiple times a week I get a call from a client fussing how slow their computer is or how the Internet takes forever to load.

I then ask them to reboot their computer, try going to that same Web site again, and call me back if the problem is still there. More than half the time that fixes the problem and I do not hear back from them.

Over time PCs slow down and their

performance degrades. Sometimes this is due to hardware problems like a dying hard drive which can be either a slow predictable death or an instantaneous failure. Remember, backups are the most important resolution to that problem.

If the hardware is solid then you need to look at the software side of things. This is where it gets tricky since there are so many moving parts in Windows. If that hard drive is physically ok then make sure it has enough free space. You can do this by clicking on Start and then My Computer under XP or just Computer under Vista.

From there, look for the Local Disk C: which is your main Windows hard drive. Check the free space and do some math to make sure you have at least 10 percent free. Anything less than that and the whole computer will run poorly.

My Acer laptop has a single hard drive that is logically divided into two drives being C: and D:. The yahoos at Acer made the partition of C: very small and it tends to fill up so I have to keep an eye on it. Occasionally I have to migrate files from the C: drive to the D: drive so the primary C: does not fill up and hose the computer.

There are two good ways to clean up your hard drive, one being a good tool to find the big stuff and another one to

find all the little pieces. Between huge video files, hundreds of digital picture files, and even thousands of temporary IE files, hard drives can fill up fast which makes PCs grind to a halt quickly.

My favorite hard drive clean up tool is WinDirStat which is a free downloadable utility you can get from Download.com.

After downloading and installing it, start it up and choose the C: drive to analyze. Do not be alarmed when you see little yellow packmen chomping right and left since it is just the programmer with an interesting sense of humor.

It is just the program finding all the files and when it has completed it will display a neat graphical representation of the hard drive with proportionately sized colored blocks representing files.

The bigger the block, the bigger the file which quickly helps you spot big file and deleted them if they are no longer necessary. Do NOT delete large critical system files like the hiberfil.sys or the pagefile.sys since those are parts of the Windows operating system.

Odds are you will find one or more very big files that you forgot about and no longer need to store on the primary hard drive. From WinDirStat you can select the file and then hit the red X de-

lete button to permanently remove the file. The graphical block display will quickly refresh to show you the new file size layout of the hard drive.

To find the small files another good free tool is called CCleaner that you can also get from Download.com. This nifty utility scans your hard drive and finds the hundreds if not thousands of small temporary files that all Internet browsers like IE, Firefox, Opera and Chrome leave behind.

CCleaner also finds other miscellaneous stuff like log files from Windows, text files from old installations, and other junk left over from previous applications. When I ran CCleaner on my laptop with the tight space problem on my C: drive, I found over 1 GB spread over thousands of little files that were able to be safely removed.

After running that cleanup, my IE ran just fine.

Bottom line: Even PCs need some house cleaning now and then so check out WinDirStat for the big stuff and CCleaner for the deep cleaning operations.

Next week's column: Getting in touch with your computer's feelings.

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